Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 until May 2011 and, as with previous years, it presented scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

About the journal

Illustrating the Sky: Abu El-Hussayn Al-Sufi’s Drawings of the Constellations
Paul Kunitzsch
18 October 2010

Carved Marble in Medieval Ghazni: Function and Meaning
Martina Rugiadi
1 November 2010

The Urban Development of the City of Cairo
Ayman Fuad Al Sayyed
15 December 2010

The Account of Two Russian Travellers to Kuwait and Ethiopia
Efim Rezvan
3 January 2011

Islamic Art at the Crossroads: Iran and China under the Mongols
Yuka Kadoi
11 January 2011

Strangers When We Met: One Hundred Years of American Community in Kuwait
Nathaniel Howell
30 May 2011

Stamp seal made of silver, the stamping face of lobed teardrop shape with a tri-lobed base, the top with a hole for suspension, engraved in Thuluth with the owner’s name ‘al-Abd Nasir ibn Ali’ and the Shi’a invocation ‘Call upon Ali, the paragon of wonders; you shall find him of help in your misfortune. All anguish and all sorrow shall disappear, through thy divine trusteeship, Oh ‘Ali, Oh ‘Ali, Oh ‘Ali’

Iranian World
9th-10th century AH/15th-16th century CE
Illustrating the Sky: Abu El-Hussayn Al-Sufi’s Drawings of the Constellations

Paul Kunitzsch
Presented in English 18 October 2010

Today, when we look at the sky with the naked eye, that is without binoculars, we see the stars as they were seen by men since the beginnings of human interest in the sky, from the Sumerians and Babylonians to the Greeks and Romans, the Arabic-Islamic world and Europe. Just in our times we are often, especially in and near the big cities and inhabited conglomeration, hampered by what has recently started to be called “light pollution”, which usually lets us see stars of first and second magnitude only, while the fainter stars become invisible behind the prevailing kinds of light.

Knowledge of the sky based only on observations of the sky with the naked eye lasted for thousands of years, until in 1609. Then, for the first time a man, Galileo, could observe stars through a telescope. Since the invention and intrusion of technical instruments astronomy was reformed and built on new foundations.

With the naked eye, on a clear dark sky, one can see 5,000 to 6,000 stars, most of them of course very small and faint. From the oldest times, and in all cultures, men have tended to recognize in the stars objects known in their living environment. These objects found in the sky are known as “constellations”. It is clear that certain configurations of stars evoked images of various objects in each culture, according to local habits and traditions. Our image of the sky has its origins with the Sumerians and Babylonians. Much of their images was transferred to the ancient Greeks and there merged with the native Greek image of the sky.

It was the astronomer Ptolemy in Alexandria who, in the middle of the second century CE, composed a great handbook of astronomy, called Mathematike Syntaxis. After its Arabic translation it was better known as the Almagest. In this great book he included a star catalogue in which he registered in tables 1,025 stars with their ecliptical coordinates, longitude and latitude, and magnitude, arranged in 48 constellations. Ptolemy’s star catalogue and his 48 constellations remained the authoritative work in astronomy for roughly one and a half thousand years, until the time of Copernicus in the sixteenth century.

In the 12th century CE the Almagest was translated from Arabic into Latin in Spain. This version remained the main authority in Latin Western astronomy until the time of Copernicus and the beginning of the “new” heliocentric astronomy.

After the spread of Islam through the countries of the Middle East and along the Mediterranean to North Africa and Spain, the Almagest was translated into Arabic three more times and formed the basis of the development of Arab scientific astronomy. Its cosmological theories were followed by Muslim astronomers through many centuries, even after the advent of the “new” Copernican astronomy in the West, which Muslim astronomers virtually ignored until modern times.

From the 18th century on, after the travels of discovery of Western sailors in the southern parts of the ocean, and further on, Western astronomers introduced a great number of new constellations, beyond the 48 constellations known from Ptolemy. It was in 1928 that the International Astronomical Union saw it necessary to set up a definite canon of 88 constellations, now described as 88 rectangular fields on the surface of the sky. Each carries the name of one former constellation existing in the respective area of the sky and fifty of the 88 constellations carry the names of Ptolemy’s 48 constellations, or - for the “Ship Argo” - for three parts of it separately; the others are named after newly introduced constellations.

From the 8th to the 10th centuries innumerable Greek scientific texts were translated into Arabic and formed the starting point for the various Arabic sciences, among them astronomy and astrology. Ptolemy’s Almagest, as already mentioned, was one of them. But it seems that also some artifacts of Greek astronomy had survived into the early Islamic period.

Figure 1
The best known example is the caldarium cupola in the bath of the desert castle of Qusayr Amra (in Jordan, east of Amman). It was constructed under the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I (r. 705-715 CE). The cupola is decorated with a fresco showing the sky with its constellations and the most important astronomical circles. In a treatise by Ibn al-Salah an Arabic description of a Greek celestial globe is cited which can be dated, from the longitude values of some stars, to 738 CE in the Umayyad period. In this way the Arabs came to know Ptolemy’s 48 constellations both from their detailed description in the text of the Almagest and from their iconographic representation on celestial globes.

It was the astronomer Abu Al-Hussayn Abdul Rahman al-Sufi (figure 1) in Iran (903-986 CE) who dedicated a special book to knowledge of the constellations. In it he described the 48 constellations, added critiques to Ptolemy’s data based on his own observations, gave full tables of the stars of each constellation (but here strictly following the Almagest; only the star magnitudes are mentioned according to his own observations), and two illustrations of each constellation, one as it is seen in the sky and the other as it is seen on the globe (the latter, however, in reality only as mirror images of the sky view images, not really as seen on the globe) (figures 2 and 3). His constellation drawings became the model for most of the Arab-Islamic astronomers in the following centuries, whether in books or on instruments like the celestial globe. Today, more than fifty manuscripts of al-Sufi’s book survive. The book has been edited in a rather poor edition in 1954 in Hyderabad, India; it appeared in a reprint in Beirut, 1981.

Al-Sufi’s book was not among the scientific Arabic works translated in great number into Latin in Spain from the late 10th - 13th centuries. Nevertheless, his constellation drawings became known in Europe. In the 13th century a compilation of astronomical texts was made of which now nine manuscripts are known. It contains Ptolemy’s star catalogue in the Latin version made from the Arabic, one drawing of each of the 48 constellations in the style of al-Sufi, and some further texts from Western tradition.

In this way al-Sufi’s drawings of the constellations had a long life both in the Arabic-Islamic and in Western world. It is obvious that al-Sufi conceived his constellation drawings based both on the textual description of the figures’ details in the Almagest and on their iconographic representation on a globe.

The old Arabs, before their acquaintance with Greek science, had developed their own form of folk
astronomy. They observed the sky for many centuries, defined hundreds of stars by name, and used the observation of their regular risings in the morning to determine seasons, periods of rain or drought, and of cold and heat, etc. But while in the Babylonian-Greek tradition, which lives on in our astronomy today, each constellation is composed of a greater number of stars; with the old Arabs each object, a human figure or animal, was represented by one star alone. Al-Sufi has registered many of the old Arabic asterisms with their name and identified their stars, as far as possible, with the corresponding stars in Ptolemy’s star catalogue. He did not draw them as images, because they mostly consisted of only one star each.

In the 16th century, the German astronomer Peter Apian (d. 1552) somehow became aware of al-Sufi’s book. Someone with knowledge of Arabic translated for him the initial portion of the book, and so he learned of a number of those old Arabic asterisms which, of course, looked quite strange to him. He mentioned them in some of his writings, and on a star map printed in two of his books, both in Ingolstadt in 1533, he even drew them as real, fully developed figures. Near the North Pole, in place of the constellations of the Lesser Bear, Cepheus and part of the Dragon, he created three girls standing in front of a seated woman, a shepherd with his dog and sheep, four camels with a young camel in their middle and two wolves creeping nearby, obviously aiming at the young camel. The map remained a single curiosity and has not found imitations afterwards. It is a late testimony for the wide-spread influence of al-Sufi in Europe, though not in the true tradition of al-Sufi and his series of constellation drawings.

Carved Marble in Medieval Ghazni: Function and Meaning

Carved marbles from Ghazni give us a major opportunity to reconstruct the architectural practices and understand the cultural framework of a period of the history of Ghazni. Specifically, it helps us understand Ghazni in the 11th and 12th centuries, when this city with a recent and still obscure Hindu-Buddhist past became the centre of a vast Muslim empire. An empire which extended from the Persian plateau to the Indian subcontinent, which embraced different ethno-linguistic groups, where different languages, at least Arabic, Persian and Turk were spoken, whose rulers led multi-confessional armies to fight Shi’ites and the infidels, being mainly interested in taking the booty and getting hold of the caliphal legitimacy; where elements apparently foreign to a Muslim culture, especially Indians, were being imitated or variously assimilated. The marbles reflect and illuminate this complexity.

Beside the few remaining monuments, much more information on the Ghaznavid period in Ghazni is provided by the archaeological investigations; primarily the works of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the period 1957 - 1966. The importance of this information is even more remarkable in light of the destruction of the archaeological site and the dispersal of part of the artifacts during the events of the last decades in Afghanistan.

Marbles were found by the Italian Mission during the excavation of a palace attributed to the Sultan Mas’ud III (a great-grandson of Mahmud); a palace whose remains were brought to light with part of the decoration still in its original collocation. The building shows a four-iwan plan arranged along a vast courtyard, with the throne hall in axis with the entrance, and a small hypostyle mosque. Almost 600 artifacts in marble (569) came from this excavation.

A small marble “arch”, bearing the titles of Mas’ud III, and two small transennas [an openwork screen of stone or metal, usually enclosing a shrine] with the names of the architects and the date of the finishing of the works, are the epigraphical evidence for the
The entrance area of the palace was probably decorated with a dado showing an interlaced sequence of plain trefoil motifs, with benedictory invocations in Arabic, in cursive script. A similar dado was in the central courtyard, where 44 panels were found in their original collocation (figure 2). This represented an ambitious programme of decoration of the crucial areas of the palace. In the mosque, eight marble bases were found in situ; they probably supported wooden columns.

As for the decoration of the southern iwan and the royal hall, circumstantial evidence suggests they were decorated with imposing marble panelling of two different types. The first type is high rectangular panels with a geometrical modular composition of whirls, framed by an epigraphic band in Arabic in Kufic script. The text does not seem to be Qur'anic and might be a poem, but is still not deciphered. The second type is a large panelling at least 1.5-2 m high, composed of rectangular panels, decorated with a pattern of octagons and knotted vegetal motifs; the Kufic band in Arabic probably bears a historical text.

More marbles – about 400 artifacts – were documented by the Italian Archaeological Mission during several surveys in the area of Ghazni. In the cemeteries and the religious buildings (especially ziyarat) marble slabs and marble fragments, whether funerary or not, were found re-employed as mihrabs, as elements of tombs or simply as wall decoration (figure 3) or floor paving. The original use of the marble objects can be identified thanks to the archaeological information and through a comprehensive functional and morphological classification. The variety of the documented shapes is ample: marble was employed with decorative functions as elements of wall and floor facings (dado panels, panels, frames, mihrab features, and floor slabs), as decorative elements in architectural decoration in the Central Asian and Iranian regions is realized mainly with brick, carved and employed in extensive wall panelling together with stucco tiles, and stucco; in Ghazni these materials are also employed, but share with marble the decoration of the buildings.

Thus, which are the premises of this peculiar production to set and flourish in Ghazni? They can be understood with the identification of the source of the marble from Ghazni, and the analysis of the stone-carving practices, but a stone-working tradition seems to be the rule. Rather, it is connected to the techniques employed in the Indo-Pakistani region (as in the earlier art of Gandhara), where toothed tools as well as rasps, abrasives and drills were not known.

We do not know much of local pre-Ghaznavid stone-carving practices, but a stone-working tradition already existed in the Shahi period (7-10th c.) in the Afghan territory; full relief statuary with smoothed surfaces. The function and the volume of these objects are very different from the Ghazni marbles, but the tools employed are the same; it seems significant that many of the known statues of the Shahi period come from Gardez, near Ghazni.

Historical sources tell us, in fact, that Ghazni was overflowing with slaves brought from the war campaigns; but they do not mention masons. However some information on the masons, on their working practices, their social status, and their cultural environment or provenance is provided by different signs documented on the marbles: the masons’ marks found on floor slabs and the location marks found on dado panels.

Masons’ marks are employed to quantify the daily work of the stonemasons, in order to give each the right compensation for his work: 34 marks were found...
on floor slabs of the palace of Mas‘ud III. (figure 5) They point to a workshop organisation implying wages. The first information that we can obtain is that the artisans who worked in the palace were freemen and not slaves, as they were paid for their work.

One of these marks, which represents a conch, might provide us further insight into the cultural background of the masons. The shape of this conch is identical to the well attested iconography of the śāṅkha, a symbol associated with the Hindu deity Vishnu, as well as with Buddha. This evidence might indicate the religious affiliation of the mason who chose it as his “signature”: the Indian community of Ghazni, mentioned by in the sources, was free to practice its religion.

Alternatively, the śāṅkha conch might remind us of the recent past of Ghazni, that had been the capital of the Buddhist reign of Zābul until the 9th century. The local site of Tepe Sardar testifies of a syncretic Buddhist-Hindu religion which was professed there and goes back in time: such an iconic sign might have survived longer than the religion it came from.

Location marks are different signs, which indicate the correct sequence of the slabs in order to facilitate the laying of a dado, where the decoration and the inscriptions need to be followed. They are incised only on the dado panels. The code behind these signs in Ghazni is mysterious and still unidentified: the signs do not follow an alphabet, but maybe an unknown numerical code. This practice is probably a legacy of earlier traditions found in the Buddhist art of Gandhara, where alphabetical sequences of the kharosti script were followed, as is attested on many slabs which composed the narrative programme of the temples. There are no known examples, as far as I know, of the use of similar systems in Islamic art before the Ghaznavid period.

The evidence we have gone through (of tool marks, masons’ marks and location marks) suggest that the stoneworking methods employed in Ghazni drew on local traditions of pre-Ghaznavid stonework productions, of which we are mostly unaware. We can conclude that the stonemasons were most probably freeman, and not Indians slaves; that still, either some of them might have been Hindu, or the legacy of the Hindu-Buddhist past of Ghazni was more effective than it is handed down by the sources.

At the same time, the epigraphic and iconographic programmes of the marbles very clearly set this production within the cultural and artistic environment of the Islamic art of the post-Samarran period, with a strong Iranian-Central Asian connection. The inscriptions are mainly in Arabic: cursive or Kufic. They contain Qur’anic verses, religious texts, benedictory invocations, or the titles and the names of the sovereigns. The only known poem in is Persian, written in foliated Kufic.

The iconography finds its models, as a rule, in Islamic art. This cultural background is very clear, for example, as regards the composition of the patterns. (figure 6) The vegetal, geometrical, and architectural motifs carved on the marbles all share geometry as a common feature: the ornaments are developed arranging the motifs along standard and geometrical rules of composition – a practice which is fundamental to Islamic art, at least since Samarra.

Three are the modes of composition:

Vertical independent units developed along a central axis. The motifs (arches and/or vegetal elements) are developed along a vertical axis to form a complete and independent decorative unit. This is not a modular pattern that can be developed in either direction, but panels can be of different shapes. The vegetal motif can be interfaced with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures in the wāq wāq [animal-head scroll] motif.

Vertical modular units connected in horizontal sequences. The motifs (merlons, arches and trefoil motifs or vegetal elements) are developed along a vertical axis to form complete units which are here connected one to the other through their terminal elements to form horizontal sequences. The sequence can be developed only horizontally and the panels can be here only of rectangular shape.

Modular units arranged along unlimited geometrical grids. The motifs (geometrical and/or vegetal) are modular units developed along a geometrical square or radial grid; following this grid the units can be developed in either direction. This composition is characterized by its versatility, because it can be interrupted at any time: it suits both very large surfaces, as in the large wall facings, or small panels within composite decorations (as in mihras and mihrab like panels, or transennas).

These rules of composition adapt the decorative motifs to the shape of the slabs; their study stresses the functionality of certain decorative choices and detects the practical techniques followed by the craftsmen (who needed preparatory sketches; moreover, it reveals the theoretical/mathematical structure which was behind the compositions, sometimes quite complex as in the star-and-polygon patterns. Geometry and order of the decoration, moreover, might have had, for cultured viewers, an intellectual connotation, as the visual counterpart of the coeval theological and philosophical notion of God as “wise Ordainer and preventing Framer” of the created world, in the words of the historian al-‘Ubi who lived in Ghazni where he was secretary at the Ghaznavid court in the 11th century (Kitab al-Yamin).

The marbles, as all the other materials employed in architectural motifs, were originally painted lapis lazuli blue, cinnabar red, and gold, and were recently identified through analyses (found by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung). With their polychromatic ornamentation, the marble panelling would have looked like “a brocaded surface”, which is one of the common definitions for the created world in literature, also employed by al-‘Ubi to express the beauty of the world created by God.

The most frequent of the non-figurative motifs is the trefoil motif (a geometrical composition with rounded profiles made of a continuous band); this motif is found in interlaced sequences on hundreds among dadoes and tombs. (figure 7) Elsewhere, in this same period, it is only sparsely encountered: at the Ghaznavid and Ghurid site of Lashkari Bazar, for example, there are no trefoil motifs at all.

The problematic interpretation of the trefoil as an architectural motif – the depiction of an arch – or as a mere geometrical motif, brings us to investigate the iconographic model on which the artisans drew. Trefoil niches or motif are often found in the local pre-Islamic architectural and decorative traditions.

In this tradition, however, the shape of the trefoil is rather approximated, irregular, and it is always associated with an architectural element, the niche. Instead, in Islamic Ghazni first, we never have architectural trefoil arches nor niches, second, the shape of the trefoil is regular, traced on a geometrical basis, exemplified by the interlacing, and seems very far from that of Hindu- and Turko-Shahi architecture and art. Its use in the Ghaznavid period must be referred to other visual models found in Islamic art: since the 9th century there is a tendency which modifies vegetal elements into stylized and repeatable trefoil forms, sometimes in sequences; a major shift in this tendency is found on stucco panels of the style.
The figurative representations on the marbles express the Iranian-Central Asian traditions already merged into Islamic art. This is visible both in the depiction of the somatic features of the personages (Figure 8) and their clothes, and in the choice of the scenes. The somatic features – rounded face with prominent cheek-bones – descend from the Central-Asian visual traditions (as in the paintings in Miran, 5th to 6th centuries); the apparent approximated execution of the faces might have been completed with the use of "alien" details, could have been inspired by the Iranian tradition, as is discernible in the characters of a standing personage (probably a court attendant) in the *dast bar sina* pose, the "conventional attitude of respectful attention".

As for the scenes – of dancers, knights in combat, guards, and of a rider hunting a lion – they depict the traditional attributes of the sovereign as fighter and pleasure-seeker, as transmitted by the Iranian tradition – the well-known concept of *bazm-o-razm* (fight and fête). Their iconography originates in pre-Islamic traditions early merged into the Islamic repertoire.

The iconographic details which reveal a different ascendance are relatively few. The dancer with the scarf (dado in the David Samlings in Copenhagen: 73.1979) is a depiction recurring in Islamic art (for example in Fatimid Egypt and in the Cappella Palatina in Sicily), with deep roots in the Sassanid and Central Asian iconographic traditions, but also not alien to the Iranian heritage and culture, as is discernible in the hands of a standing personage (probably a court attendant) in the *dast bar sina* pose, the "conventional attitude of respectful attention".

As for the scenes – of dancers, knights in combat, guards, and of a rider hunting a lion – they depict the traditional attributes of the sovereign as fighter and pleasure-seeker, as transmitted by the Iranian tradition – the well-known concept of *bazm-o-razm* (fight and fête). Their iconography originates in pre-Islamic traditions early merged into the Islamic repertoire.

The figurative representations on the marbles express the Iranian-Central Asian traditions already merged into Islamic art. This is visible both in the depiction of the somatic features of the personages (Figure 8) and their clothes, and in the choice of the scenes. The somatic features – rounded face with prominent cheek-bones – descend from the Central-Asian visual traditions (as in the paintings in Miran, 5th to 6th centuries); the apparent approximated execution of the faces might have been completed with the painted decoration. The clothes of the personages are mostly full geometric interlaced patterns.

Once demonstrated that the trefoil motif in Ghazni is drawn directly from the Islamic iconographic repertoire, it might be suggested that a reminiscence of the local iconographic traditions possibly facilitated the diffusion of this motif: a feeble residue of these traditions is suggested by the second earliest tomb in Ghazni (dated in 447/1055: Muhammad al-Harawi, nisba Heart, bāghbān gardener), where an irregular trefoil motif, closer to the Buddhist trefoil niches rather than to the Ghaznavid trefoils, frames the epitaph of the defunct.

The three female dancers on a transenna once in the Kabul Museum (now probably destroyed) are apparently a conventional representation of group dance in Islamic art. The somatic characteristics of the personages, their clothes and the beaded head ornaments, as well as the movement of the legs are all conventional elements: (similar head ornaments, typical of female dancers/attendants, are in the painting of the Samarra dancers/cup-bearers; the dance movement of the risen leg and bent knee is, according to [noted Islamic scholar Ernst J.] Grube, the Islamic version of a Central Asian dance imported by Turkic elements as early as the Abbasid period.

However two of the dancers are engaged in an unconventional gesture with their hands; this image has no parallels in Islamic art. (Figure 9) Hands are usually put around the companion's shoulder in representation of group dances. Instead, this depiction is evocative of a specific position/movement in Indian dance, which is not often depicted in the otherwise rich Indian iconography of the dance. It is however specifically described in the historical texts: it is the mutra anjali, one of the symbolic positions of the two hands together (hasta samyukta); it is also the greeting gesture in both the Buddhist and Hindu traditions.

In the slab from Ghazni this gesture might go back to local traditions of the pre-Islamic period. Otherwise, more probably, the image might be the attempt of a local artisan to depict Indian dancers who possibly performed at the court in Ghazni, where the presence of Hindu women is confirmed by the sources. The artisan based his work mainly on known iconographies (as the somatic features of the personages) and combined them with a new form, that of the hand gesture – an attempt of realism which reveals a taste for exoticism.

An exotic scene has been identified in the famous slab with the depiction of a monkey in the Linden Museum, the only narrative scene known on the Ghazni marbles, and one of the earliest attested in Islamic art (beside miniatures); the origin of this image lies in several stories telling about monkeys employed by humans for the cropping of fruits that grow on inaccessible trees. These stories, frequent in the *'ajā'ib literature, are set in fabulous islands, located in India or the far East. Maria Vittoria Fontana sees in the architecture within which the scene is depicted – evoking a Kashmiri or northwest Indian temple – an attempt to place the scene in an "Indian" context.

On the whole, the personages evoke the courtly life in its ludic-intellectual actuality (real or imagined) as well as for its military authority and rulership. The latter is also enhanced by the representation of fantastic beasts (such as winged lions, bulls and goats, griffins, sphinxes, dragons, double-headed eagles) as well as real animals (peacocks, lions, elephants), (Figure 10) all evocative of the kingship of power; many of them are probably originating in the Turkic-Central Asian traditions.

In conclusion: Local sources and working tradition set the basis for the emergence of marble working in Ghazni in the 11th century. The style and the composition of non-figurative motifs, as well as the style and the repertoire of figurative representations place these marble carvings in the wide horizon of Islamic art of the post-Samarran period, within the strong Iranian-Central Asian tradition, identifying it as the immediate forerunner of Seljuk art; it presumably reflects what were the artistic trends in the caliphal capital of Baghdad. At the same time, some iconographic details alien to Islamic art help to contextualize the production in the peculiar cultural horizon of Ghazni, especially as far as concerns links and/or echoes of non-Islamic cultures, both for possible resilient elements of the pre-Islamic period in Ghazni and for the coeval connections with the Indian subcontinent and its artistic and architectural productions.

Special thanks to Dr. Rugiadi for sharing her images from the Islamic Ghazni dig with the DAI.
The Urban Development of the City Of Cairo

It is well known that Cairo, the capital of Egypt, is the largest city in the modern Arab world. For a thousand years it has been, and still is, considered to be the centre of Arab-Islamic civilisation. Its historical quality isolates it from the rest of the Islamic world and the amount of religious, social and warfare artefacts is unequalled. These artefacts allow us to study the evolution of Cairo's Islamic architectural style.

Cairo lacks detailed studies of its history, despite the existence of numerous documents and manuscripts (complete and partial). The millennial anniversary of the city of Cairo in 1969 brought to light the issue of the limited research studies available on the construction of the city, and also the lack of knowledge about the history of Cairo's growth and development.

The city of Cairo lies between the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley, right on the north-south axis of Egypt. This unique location links Cairo to Egypt's nature and land. The capital of Egypt was relocated several times (Memphis, Heliopolis or “Ein Shams,” Babylon Fortress, etc.) before settling in Cairo. This area is the heart of Egypt's Islamic and urban culture, allowing the development of today's local customs and rituals.

Following the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 20 AH/641 CE, Fustat became the first Islamic city in Egypt and Africa. A century after the Abbasid Caliphate came to power a new district north east of Fustat was built. It is well known that Cairo, the capital of Egypt, is the largest city in the modern Arab world. For a thousand years it has been, and still is, considered to be the centre of Arab-Islamic civilisation. Its historical quality isolates it from the rest of the Islamic world and the amount of religious, social and warfare artefacts is unequalled. These artefacts allow us to study the evolution of Cairo's Islamic architectural style.

The next step of the relocation of the capital was also towards the northeast. This left a considerably large area between Cairo and Al Qatta'i, which had completely deteriorated, threatening the safety of the Fatimid caliphs who resided there. As a result, they were relocated to the city they named Al Qahira, or “Cairo.” It only consisted of a lavish palace, barracks for the soldiers and a government headquarters. Fustat remained the market for trade and the centre of cultural and social activity.

Fustat was intentionally burned down in 564 AH/1068 CE to prevent the imminent occupation of the attacking enemy (the Christian King, Amalric I of Jerusalem). Only then, did Cairo become the true centre of government in Islamic Egypt.

Salah ad-Din, vizier of Egypt, erected walls that enclosed Cairo, solidifying the city's role as the true capital. He ordered the walls to be built not only for the purpose of isolating Cairo, but also to protect the newly constructed Citadel of Cairo, the central location of the government headquarters, on a plateau beneath the Mukattam Hills. What was left of Fustat and Al Qatta'i was also included within the walls built by Salah ad-Din.

The Citadel is considered to be the most important product of the short reign of the Ayyubid dynasty, before the Mamluks seized power in 658 AH/1250 CE. At that time, the Citadel became the official seat of government in Egypt and remained so for many centuries. Finally, in 1290 AH/1874 CE, Khedive Ismail Pasha relocated the government headquarters to his newly built Abdin Palace in the heart of modern Cairo.

During the Mamluk period, Cairo's Fatimid border deteriorated with the expansion of the city towards the south, reaching the neighbourhoods of Birkaat Al Fil and Birkaat Al Azbakaya. A new neighborhood named Boulaq was developed northwest of Cairo, on the river Nile, to take the place of the ancient port of Fustat.

In the wake of the fall of the Mamluks in Egypt and the Levant in 923 AH/1517 CE and the takeover by the Ottoman Empire, the new superpower of the Islamic world, Cairo lost its status as the Mamluk capital. However, it was still an important city for the Ottomans. It was considered the second principal city, after Istanbul. Cairo's commercial, economic and social activity compensated for its political decay.

In general, Cairo did not suffer a great deal during the three centuries of Ottoman rule. In fact, by the eighteenth century, it expanded and became more populous than it had ever been. The city remained an active religious and cultural centre of the Ottoman Empire, in part because of the practices of the Al Azhar Mosque. During the Ottoman era Al Azhar quickly became known as a major Islamic university, a position it holds today.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1286 AH/1869 CE, inspired the drive to build a new city, eventually named “the district of Ismailia,” directly west of the historic city of Suez. The city was built by adopting the methods Georges-Eugène Haussmann used in the modernization programme he developed for the rebuilding of Paris.

This drastic change in power was demonstrated by the massacre of a significant number of prominent Mamluks in 1226 AH/1811 CE. These events launched a long series of reform and modernization.

The year 1279 AH/1863 CE was a historically significant year for Cairo because Ismail Pasha came to power (1279-1298 AH/1863-1879 CE). He was the first ruler in nine centuries to comprehensively organise a project aimed to develop the city. The project was based on a plan to rejuvenate the western part of Cairo.

This plan expanded and was set to modernise all of Egypt to show the world that it was not only part of Africa, but was a part of Europe as well. Ismail Pasha also decided to permanently relocate the government headquarters from the Citadel beneath the Mukattam Hills to Cairo. He aspired to make Cairo “like Paris” and to prove that it was worthy of being the capital of Egypt.

The year 1279 AH/1863 CE was a historically significant year for Cairo because Ismail Pasha came to power (1279-1298 AH/1863-1879 CE). He was the first ruler in nine centuries to comprehensively organise a project aimed to develop the city. The project was based on a plan to rejuvenate the western part of Cairo.

This plan expanded and was set to modernise all of Egypt to show the world that it was not only part of Africa, but was a part of Europe as well. Ismail Pasha also decided to permanently relocate the government headquarters from the Citadel beneath the Mukattam Hills to Cairo. He aspired to make Cairo “like Paris” and to prove that it was worthy of being the capital of Egypt.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1286 AH/1869 CE, inspired the drive to build a new city, eventually named “the district of Ismailia,” directly west of the historic city of Suez. The city was built by adopting the methods Georges-Eugène Haussmann used in the modernization programme he developed for the rebuilding of Paris.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1286 AH/1869 CE, inspired the drive to build a new city, eventually named “the district of Ismailia,” directly west of the historic city of Suez. The city was built by adopting the methods Georges-Eugène Haussmann used in the modernization programme he developed for the rebuilding of Paris.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the creation of new neighbourhoods in the city of Cairo, such as Garden City, Zamalek, El Manial, Maadi, Helwan, Heliopolis and Nasr City. The city of Cairo also developed numerous public facilities such as the parliament buildings, the Egyptian University, the Khedivial Kotob Khan, the Egyptian Museum and so on. Thanks to these cultural and educational institutions, Cairo is a beaming light in the Arab world.
The Account of Two Russian Travellers to Kuwait and Ethiopia

Sergey Syromyatnikov. Journalist as Diplomat and Intelligence Agent:

“When I was galloping along the steppe on the charger mare of the sheikh, and Arabs that accompanied me were shaking their whips, as though they were spears, and chanting war songs, to the sound of which their horses proudly raised their heads and spreading their tails in the wind, I understood the fascination of their free life in this waterless country and the proud with which it cultivated in its sons”.

Sergey Syromyatnikov

Sergey Syromyatnikov (1864—1933) who is mentioned in the archives documents as the author of the project of the palace of Khaza'al, Sheikh of Muhammerah, was a remarkable personality — a St. Petersburg University Candidate of Law, specialist in ancient Scandinavian culture, a writer, a well-known journalist, editor-in-chief of the official government paper “Rossiya”. He was actively publishing his works in Russian and foreign newspapers and magazines. In 1900 Russian composer Peter Schenck wrote his fantasy opera “Actaeu” based on the plot of the short story by Syromyatnikov. He corresponded with Russian political figures, prominent masters of Russian culture and science, including famed Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev, of whom we will speak below.

Syromyatnikov was closely connected with the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich (the grandson of Tsar Nikolai I and a childhood friend of Tsar Nikolai II) and was sent to the Gulf on a secret mission in 1900. He was accompanied by Staff Captain V. K. de-Pellenberg of the Pavlovsk Guards’ Regiment and Bekir Gamazov, an Osset. The influential group of the Grand Duke’s was displeased with the passive approach and that the arrival of ‘Gilyak’ greatly increased his status. The trip and published in Russian journals were a rather interesting source on Syromyatnikov’s trip emerged out of nowhere. It was searched out and found by Boris Syromyatnikov, a grandnephew of Sergey Syromyatnikov, who told the striking story. Tidying up his apartment he brushed a drawer, opened it and found a diary, a letter, and a photograph of the trip. Among the documents the little box contained was a diary (figure 1) by Sergey Syromyatnikov written during his trip to the Gulf region.

The trip to the Gulf lasted from 23 April to 2 October 1900 and Syromyatnikov’s book (figure 2) makes it possible to reconstruct his route. After the farewell meeting with Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich in his Crimean estate “Ay-Todor”, Syromyatnikov went by steamer from Odessa to Bombay. From there, in order to avoid special attention of English-Indian authorities, his group set out for the Gulf by the following route: Muscat to Bandar-e Abbas to Linga to Bahrain and Bushreh, then travelling along the Tiger and Euphrates Rivers, he set off for Baghdad. He travelled from Kut to Amara to Gurna to Basra to Fao before he arrived to Kuwait. Kuwait proved to be the most important point of his journey. After Kuwait, Syromyatnikov again travelled throughout the Gulf.

Undoubtedly, the main point of the route was Kuwait. In this connection it is rather significant that after his conversations with Sheikh Mubarak Syromyatnikov again visited main ports of the Gulf. Three of five travel essays were as the result of the trip and published in Russian journals were dedicated to Kuwait.

“Surrounded by his retinue, Sheikh Mubarak slowly came down the narrow stairs. He was a medium-size old man with a broad and thick beard, thin almost-brown face, furiously wrinkled. His brown eyes were expressive and pensive. His motions were well-measured and filled with loftiness. There was something sad in his eyes.

He told me he was glad to see a Russian man...”

In the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Russia was actively expanding its activities in the East. Many expeditions and journeys were organised, with prominent figures of Russian culture participating. The state spent significant resources for the purpose of acquiring interesting manuscripts and museum collections connected with the Islamic world. In this period the widest circles of the Muslim population of Russia shared the ideas of religious and political revival and the state began consistently asserting the rights of its Muslim subjects abroad. Russian archives, museums and private collections contain astonishing materials linked to the journeys of this type.

Professors Efim Rezvan is deputy director of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, at the Russian Academy of Science, and editor-in-chief for an International Journal for Oriental Manuscripts Research. He has more than 250 research works published in ten languages including books, articles and monographs on Qur’anic studies and Russian- Arab relations.
oriental conversation interspersed with the formulas of politeness and flattery”.

However, we learn of the important results of negotiations with the Sheikh again only from the recently discovered diary: “... I drew up the following dispatch: Was in Kuwait. The ruler continues to request the protection of Russia. ... The dispatch was not accepted on account of being encrypted”. Syromyatnikov reported the negotiation results by means of letters to the Russian consulates in Baghdad and Damascus.

In the materials prepared as the results of the trip, Syromyatnikov gave detailed information on the history and economy of Kuwait, recounted of military and political significance, related his own impressions of various types: “The population of Kuwait is about 30,000 inhabitants who live in 3,000 houses; of them 50 are Jews from Bushehr, for whom the Sheikh built a synagogue, which is rented to them for 20 roubles per year. There are over 500 shops in the city, three hotels, six coffee houses, many granaries, three schools with one hundred students, four mosques. ... The nature of the population can be judged by the fact that each year up to 30 new houses are built and 40 new shops are opened”.

“According to rather incomplete information, which I gathered at the spot, various sorts of goods are imported into Kuwait to the amount of 670,000 roubles per year. I think that export reaches about the same figure, including the export of pearls to the sum of about 200,000 roubles per year. If the English take 3% from export and import, they will then acquire at least 67,000 roubles per year for the protection of Kuwait, which, of course, is enough to have a gunboat in the Kuwaiti gulf and even bring some worthless cannons ashore for the purpose of intimidating Turks”.

From Kuwait Syromyatnikov set out for Muhammerah. For this journey Sheikh Mubarak put his yacht at his disposal and wrote the ruler of Muhammerah a letter, in which he called Syromyatnikov “his son” and recommended him as a serious partner for negotiations.

Based on the results of the meetings with Sheikh Khaza’il, the ruler of Muhammerah, Syromyatnikov writes in his diary: “He invited me for lunch. Before lunch I was presented with a few gifts: a carpet and a diamond ring. He requested rifles and protectorate”. In accordance with the diary the discussion of this subject matter was to be continued on the next day: “August 14/27th of 1900. Sheikh came before breakfast. We talked about the conditions of the protectorate. At five o’clock there is a serious conversation about the conditions. He wrote with his own hand (underlined by Syromyatnikov, — E.R.):

We must defend him from his enemies that come by land and sea.

If need be we must supply [him] with weapons and money.

Not to deprive him of subjects and not to interfere in internal affairs. Not to deprive him of customs, neither land nor sea ones, and not to interfere in the way they are run, not to demand for an account from anyone but him.

After his death to render patronage to his children, reconcile them and protect them from attacks from all sides for as long as Russia exists, from age to age.

He pledges to immediately supply us with 5,000 horsemen (more or less) armed with Martini [rifles] with 500 cartridges per each horsemen”.

It is absolutely evident that the results of negotiations of Syromyatnikov in Kuwait and Muhammerah had the potential to create drastic changes in the state of forces in the Gulf. In this connection it is not surprising that the Englishmen did their best to hinder Syromyatnikov and his people. During one of the attacks he was wounded in the leg and efforts were made to confiscate materials relating to the trip.

The documents mentioned above include exciting and unique documentary evidence about this short but very important period in Russian-Arab relations. Communication with the Russians was easy and Russian policy at that time paralleled the interest of the Gulf people who were pressing for independence. All this helped Russia to build up its influence in the region.
outstanding Russian poet of the Silver Age, a courageous officer and an intrepid traveller, who was executed by Cheka in 1921, convicted of participating in a counter-revolutionary plot. The poet brought back not only ethnographic and manuscript collections, but also impressions that inspired a number of poetic works. Today these are considered treasures of Russian literature.

In 2008 the Kunstkamera Museum started a project devoted to his Ethiopian trip of 1913. Within the project we organized an expedition to the south-eastern regions of Ethiopia. In 12 days the expedition walked almost 5,500 km and saw the places Gumilyov had seen almost 100 years ago. As a result, the Museum hopes to present soon an exhibition and media project.

It was in Harar, historically one of the most important Islamic cities of Africa, that Gumilyov compiled a major part of his collections stored now in Kunstkamera Museum and it is not surprising that a significant portion was related to Islamic booklore. The poet’s personal interests and the specific character of Harar as an Islamic booklore regional centre met there.

The old part of Harar (Harar jugol) surrounded by walls is sacred for local Muslims. They find a silhouette of a praying person bent in a low bow even in the city wall shape. Thus, the space of the city becomes a kind of a prayer carpet. The length of the wall (6666 cubits) is equal to the number of the Qur’an ayat, and the number of gates (five) is associated with the five “pillars” (arkan) of Islam. As a sacral space, the city is divided into seven circles (shirts) and the “level of sanctity” is decreasing with the movement from the city centre to the city wall (the last circle encloses the city wall on the outside).

Harar is known as “the city of saints” (madinat al-awliya’) and in the opinion of local people it is the fourth Islamic city by religious value. Even at present Harar citizens affirm that the city has 99 mosques (according to the number of Allah names) and about 300 saint graves. Harar jugol is included into the List of World Heritage by UNESCO. That was Nikolay Gumilyov’s view of Harar in 1913.

“Already from the mountain top Harar looked gorgeous with its houses made of red sandstone, high European buildings and pointed minarets of mosques. It was surrounded by a wall and people were not allowed to get through the gates after the sunset. Inside it looked exactly like Baghdad in the times of Harun al-Rashid with its narrow streets going up or down like stairs, massive wooden doors, squares full of noisy people in white clothes, the court right there in the square — all of that was full of old fairy-tale charm”.

For centuries Harar was a manuscript production centre famous all over Africa. A century ago there was a whole district where bookbinding craftsmen lived. In the book about his Harar trip famous British scholar and traveller Richard Burton described his visit to important local sheikh and his impression of the manuscript collection. The scene described by Burton long ago was virtually repeated in 2008 in Harar when we visited Sheikh ‘Abd Allah Musa, a keeper by birth of Sayyid ‘Ali Hamdong’s mazar. (figure 3) We listened carefully to the Sheikh, who took a wonderful large-format Qur’an manuscript and, then, a number of folios from a metal lock-box, telling us about the saint he worshipped. The manuscripts as well as their covers were of really high quality. As it turned out later, one of the covers brought by Gumilyov was once a part of the manuscript from mazar Sayyid ‘Ali Hamdong’s library.

Nikolay Gumilyov brought to Russia not only a collection of manuscripts and covers, but also tool sets of a craftsman and a scribe. In April of 2008 the MAE expedition members managed to buy some more items of that range, such as qalams, a bronze pen-case, and an ink pot. Now St. Petersburg owns a unique collection of material elements and technical characteristics of scribal tradition in Harar — a centre that for a long time reproduced and maintained large amounts of written texts, which played a key role in Islam expansion not only in the South-East of Ethiopia, but in the Horn of Africa in general.

The second most important destination of Gumilyov in Ethiopia was the Sheikh Hussein memorial complex (figure 4). There are quite a few sites in the Muslim world pilgrimage to which may be equalized by locals to the hajj to Makkah under certain conditions. Among these places is a mausoleum of Hakim-shaykh (the village of Baishevo of Vagaysky district of Tyumen region), the tomb of Ahmad Yassaw in the city of Turkestan (Kazakhstan) and the tomb of Appaq-khwa in Kashgharia, the tomb of Ja‘far al-Sadiq (Khotan region), the tomb of Baha’ al-Din Naqshband (Bukhara), the sacred mountain of Takht-i Sulayman (Osh), the mausoleum of Shaykh Burhan al-Din (Ulakan, Western Sumatra). The memorial complex of Shaykh Hussayn is probably most interesting among them as none of these sacred sites model the structure of Arabian shrines and requires pilgrims, in its essence, to repeat the key rituals of hajj:

I led a caravan for eight days from Harar Through the wild chercher Mountains. And I shot grey monkeys on the trees. And fell asleep among the roots of sycamore. A mysterious city, a tropical Rome, I saw tall Sheikh Hussein, I bowed to the mosque and to the holy palms, And was admitted before the eyes of the prophet.

These lines of the Gumilyov poem were preceded by the field note: “In half an hour of our beautiful journey we reached overflowing Wabi. We started shouting and shooting in order to scare crocodiles away, and then we went swimming. Crocodiles were swelling around, which scared the mules who began sinking, rushed along the stream. Shots were heard all around us. From Kolya’s leg, whose mule overturned itself, a crocodile tore a spat off; and it tore off a shama from another boy. All soaked we got out of the water, and having taken all our clothes off we were drying ourselves on the riverbank. Then we were fishing…. I’ve got fever and nephritis. We have nothing to drink …. The mountain of Sheikh Hussein is already in sight; we crossed a large ravine and found ourselves on a plain. We were walking for 6 hours”.

Nikolay Gumilyov saw Sheikh Hussein on June 25, 1913. His caravan journeyed for twenty days from Harar. Only three European expeditions travelled through Sheikh Hussein before Gumilyov.

The photographs of Sheikh Nur Hussein hagiography brought by Gumilyov, as well as his comments in the journey journal and photographs of the sacred sites, prove that Gumilyov collected scientific materials that were unique to those times. Those materials had and still have scientific meaning today. Their destiny, though, did not turn to be very fortunate.

“It’s hard to acquire the light; to quench it, though, is easy…”, said Sheikh Nur Hussein, as the legend runs. The collection and the photos arrived at the museum right before WWI; and events that followed (Bolshevik revolution and Civil War in Russia) hindered their movement into the scientific circulation. The circumstances of the poet’s death made the materials that he had brought taboo for a long time.

Gumilyov’s poetry embodied both his field experience and scientific knowledge received in the museum during preparation for the expedition. Poems of his African series make reading his field journal a very true and absolutely unique experience. There are no similar examples in the history of Russian poetry, as well as no other ethnographic collection professionally compiled by a poet.
Islamic Art at the Crossroads: 
Iran and China under the Mongols

Yuka Kadoi
Presented in English
11 January 2011

The Mongol invasion of Eurasia in the 13th century became a turning point in the development of the visual and material culture of the Islamic world. This is particularly evident in the art of Iran under the political control of the Mongols from the mid-13th to the mid-14th centuries. With the fascination of portable objects of Chinese and East Central Asian origin that became widely available in West Asia thanks to the socio-cultural unification of a vast geographical area of the Eurasian Continent, a unique, hitherto unknown style – Islamic chinoiserie – was born in the art of Iran under the auspices of the Pax Mongolica.

Based on the foundation of the trans-Eurasian trade network that had been laid in the course of century-old commercial and diplomatic activities by land and by sea (figure 1), the Mongol invasion of Eurasia in the 13th century facilitated large scale exchanges of people, goods and ideas between east and west. As the Mongols moved westwards into West Asia and established a Mongol khanate (Ilkhanid; 1256-1353) in Iran, they brought a number of new artistic concepts to the Iranian and Islamic cultural sphere through portable objects of Chinese and East Central Asian origin. This resulted to a significant degree in the shift of artistic balance in the art of Iran.

The most powerful agency for this cultural transmission was the textile. Being nomads, the Mongols traditionally had few possessions, and therefore they paid a lot of attention to portable objects, such as silk textiles in the form of costumes and tent hangings, as a symbol of social status and wealth. The idea of wearing luxurious dress was eventually assimilated into the Iranian world under Mongol cultural influence, and this can be attested by the frequent use of Mongol-style costumes in the images of rulers and major characters in 14th-century Iranian manuscript painting (figure 2). Here a princely figure is depicted wearing a dark blue robe richly embroidered with gold decoration, his high social rank further emphasised by an elaborate feathered hat, another hierarchical symbol in Mongol society.

Textiles of the Iranian world began to bear certain Chinese features from the mid-13th century onwards, incorporating typical East Asian animal themes, such as the dragon and the phoenix, as well as a naturalistic bent, into the whole design scheme. Such elements appear to have initially been known through imported textiles from China and East Central Asia, and these were widely copied by Ilkhanid artisans not only in woven fabrics (figure 3) but also in different media of the decorative arts, for example in tilework (figure 4). The ubiquity of Chinese-inspired themes in the art of Iran during the Mongol period seems to owe much to the wide availability of paper and its involvement in the process of design making, a method which enabled several artisans to share the same design. It is also important to see how China made a significant contribution to the imagery of the dragon, a mythical creature that existed in Iranian culture long before the Mongol period, together with the simurgh (a Persian equivalence to the Chinese phoenix).

China had also been known as the land of white porcelain since ancient times. The beauty of Chinese ceramics, particularly porcelain with its whiteness, strength and translucence, continued to attract the eyes of Iranian potters who were unable to create similar pieces due to the lack of quality material in West Asia. A continuous fascination with Chinese ceramics during the Mongol period is well reflected in the two types of Iranian copy of Chinese porcelain.

The first is the famous blue and white ware. Although the idea of using cobalt blue as a decorative medium for ceramics was initially developed in West Asian contexts rather than in East Asian cultural backgrounds, this device was adapted and further developed during the 14th century by Chinese potters into the high level of technical and stylistic sophistication. The importation of Chinese blue and white porcelain to Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East encouraged the production of Iranian and broadly Middle Eastern copies of such products for the domestic market. This set a continuous fashion for the blue and white scheme in the ceramic arts of this part of the world for centuries.

Another key type of Chinese porcelain displays a distinctive jade-like apple-green glaze, known as celadon. As in the case of the blue and white ware, Chinese celadon porcelain provided a source of artistic inspiration and imitation for Iranian potters from the 14th century onwards. Yet compared with the Chinese model (figure 5), the general appearance of the Iranian copy of celadon (figure 6), which is made of an artificial ceramic body called frit rather than porcelain, is less translucent and devoid of absolute hardness. Furthermore, a pair of fish decoration originally employed in the
A tendency to exclude metalwork from the major discussion of chinoiserie in Islamic art is mainly due to the fact that metal making traditions were more deeply rooted in West Asia than in East Asia where other types of object, notably porcelain and jade, functioned almost as a substitute of metal products. Although Chinese decorative motifs, such as the dragon and the phoenix, can be found in the design of Ilkhanid metalwork, this medium of art remained intrinsically West Asian or Islamic.

Among the notable decorative features in Ilkhanid metalwork, the frequent occurrence of the lotus as a single floral motif or part of the naturalistic setting stands out. This enchanting motif appears in a wide variety of the media of the arts, ranging from textiles, ceramics, manuscript painting to architectural decoration (figure 7), demonstrating that the motif, primarily developed in Buddhist contexts as a symbol of purity, rebirth and the Buddha, may have acquired a new decorative significance in Islamic Iranian cultural environments. Alternatively, one could argue that the motif was widely used in different media of the arts, again thanks to the use of paper cartoons at the Ilkhanid workshops, with the result of standardising a distinctive Ilkhanid ‘dynastic’ style of dual cultural backgrounds of East Asia and West Asia.

The manuscript painting of Mongol Iran also displays other pictorial ideas derived from China. These range from the hanging scroll format which is effective to stress the sense of height to the horizontal arrangement of illustrations which shows a striking similarity to that typically found in the Chinese woodblock - printed books. This indicates that Iranian painters of the Mongol period had a good accessibility to a wide range of pictorial sources from China.

Iconographically, too, China or broadly East Asia had an indelible impact on the development of the pictorial arts of Mongol Iran. Along with the assimilation of East Asian facial and sartorial features in the main characters, many iconographic elements of Buddhist derivation, particularly those that came from Tibetan Buddhism, were widely adapted for the image of rulers in Ilkhanid manuscript painting, particularly in terms of posture and gesture. This Buddhist-Iranian art-historical relation should not be a surprising fact, given that Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, was patronised by the Mongols in Iran during the early periods of Ilkhanid rule until their official conversion to Islam in 1295.

As a concluding remark, let us consider the nature of chinoiserie in European and Islamic art. European chinoiserie is the European notion of how China should be like within the European cultural setting. Although it became an important aspect of European art, especially the decorative arts of the 18th century, it was essentially a one-way movement and thus serves as an example of the asymmetrical relationship between eastern and western parts of the Eurasian Continent. On the other hand, Islamic chinoiserie is the Islamic admiration, understanding and adaptation of Chinese art based on the fruitful exchange of ideas, styles and techniques. It became one of the fundamental parameters in the development of Islamic art, especially the art of Islamic Iran, and remained influential in later periods, such as the times of the Timurids and Safavids, as a reminder of the past when the Eurasian Continent was unified under the Mongols.

Figure 1: East-West overland and maritime trade routes.
Figure 2: Double-page frontispiece from the Mu'nu al-ahwar (left page). Isfahan, 1341. The al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar Isfahan (after A Survey of Persian Art, fig. 484).
Figure 3: Parrots and dragons. Silk and gold wrapped thread. East Iranian world, c. 1300. Kunstgewermbuseum, Berlin (1875.258).
Figure 4: Lustre tile with a dragon and lotuses. Iran, c. 1270-5. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (641-1900).
Figure 5: Celadon dish with spring-moulded decoration. China, 13th century. Formerly Peckham David Foundation of Chinese Art, London (PDF 26).
Figure 6: Dish covered in a green glaze (celadon imitation). Iran, 14th century. Davids Collection, Copenhagen (PDF 26).
Strangers When We Met: One Hundred Years of American Community in Kuwait

Nathaniel Howell
Presented in English
30 May 2011

What is particularly striking about the expansion of American interests into the Gulf and, specifically, to Kuwait, was the extent to which the flag followed, rather than led, private Americans. We know that the first American warship visited the Gulf in December 1879 when the U.S. S. Ticonderoga visited Bushire [Persia] and Basra. Its mission apparently was to conclude a consular agreement with Persia in light of existing commercial trade. There is no evidence of calls by American vessels at Kuwait in the Nineteenth Century. So, it was not until 1951, when Great Britain relented and permitted the establishment of a U.S. Consulate, that there was an official presence here. Until that time, the consular needs of the growing American community of drillers and other oil workers were served by periodic visits of a Consul from Basra. In a real sense, therefore, the foundations for the Kuwaiti-American relationship were laid by doctors, missionaries, educators and oilmen. Governments simply ratified and built upon that structure.

The path to friendship was, of course, not always smooth, although it was seldom hostile. Americans and Kuwaitis were truly strangers to one another when their first contacts occurred. Missionaries belonging to what they called the Arabian Mission had visited Kuwait periodically beginning in the 1890s but were regarded with understandable suspicion. Sheikh Mubarak the Great, however, had a positive experience with a missionary doctor while visiting Sheikh Khaz’al at Mohammera and had the vision to see what they might do for the Kuwaiti people. He invited the Arabian Mission to establish a clinic in Kuwait in 1911-12, one hundred years ago. Although Bedouin and other marginal elements sought treatment in those first years, it would take a decade for the American mission to achieve broader acceptance. The catalyst for this transformation was the Battle of Jahra and the remarkably low number of deaths as a consequence of treatment at the Mission Hospital. Sheikh Mubarak did not live to see this vindication of his decision, but his words in 1914 reflect his certitude:

“Today I ask myself, ‘Who are these people to whom I have sold this piece of land, on which we are standing? Are they politicians? No, they are not. Are they a business firm? No. What have they come here for? They have come here to teach us, and the Lord knows we need teaching. They have come here to build a hospital and to take care of our sick. They have come here to do us good.”

The full story of the experience of the American Mission Hospital until its closure and absorption in the new Kuwait health system in 1987 would take all the time I have and more. So, I will conclude with just three observations:

First, these were dedicated people who were sincerely interested in the society in which they chose to live. Second, the historian is fortunate that the missionaries were highly literate people who left us with extensive written and oral accounts not simply of great events, but daily life, from locust invasions and chronic smallpox epidemics to the education of their children and the nature of their worship services. Finally, Americans generally bring their families with them when they settle anywhere for extended periods; it is not surprising, therefore, that the first Western children born and raised in Kuwait were Americans.

The next waves of American residents were the small groups of petroleum engineers, drillers and others involved in the exploration for oil in the 1930s. Later, as KOC, a British-American joint venture, developed its facilities, other Americans also occupied important executive positions. But, it was the early arrivals and their south-western twangs and drawls that drew the most attention. Some of the more, sedate British residents of the time viewed them as “cowboys”, but they knew their jobs and made major contributions to Kuwait’s transition to the age of oil. Perhaps their rougher edges were smoothed somewhat by their insistence that their families accompany them. Americans, and especially the wives, played an important role in creating communities in Ahmadi and the oil camps. It is unfortunate that most of this group were not inclined to record their experiences and memories, but there is enough material in other sources to reconstruct those times.

It surprised me to learn that, prior to the development associated with the petroleum industry, the Americans affiliated with the American Mission constituted the largest group of Western expatriates residing in Kuwait. The British Residency seldom exceeded four or five persons, including families. As the American population grew following the Second World War, and the number of U.S. ships calling at Kuwait increased, the demand for consular services could not be met by monthly visits from the Consulate in Basra. The United States government began to consider the establishment of a consulate in Kuwait. Over a period of several years, this was the subject of extended discussions between Washington and London, with the British resisting an official American presence. Eventually, it was agreed that American Consuls could open here under unique arrangements that respected Britain’s special responsibility for Kuwait’s foreign relations.

The U.S. Consulate that opened in Kuwait in 1951 was under the American Embassy in London, rather than the Middle East office of the State Department and the resident Consuls were to have no access to the Ruler except through the British Resident, who also retained judicial jurisdiction over all non-Kuwaiti residents. This arrangement worked reasonably well because of good personal relationships, although some Britons suspected that the United States was seeking to displace them.

With the arrival of the American diplomats in Kuwait, the written record is once again very rich and extensive. Like the personnel of the American Mission, they were interested in and sensitive to the country and its people. Foreign Service Officers have extensive experience in observing, analyzing and reporting on their environment and their recollections reflect these traits. When I began my research in the late 1980s, I began to solicit memories of their time in Kuwait from friends, beginning with the Consuls -- Bill Brewer, Harry Symmes, Bill Stolzus, Dayton Mak -- who were here before independence. Their replies were full of details and impressions, not just of the political issues of the time but details of daily life; relationships with Sheikhs, businessmen

Ambassador W. Nathaniel Howell is a professor of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, where he is also the director of the Institute for Global Policy Research and the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Studies Program. He joined the University upon retirement from the Foreign Service of the United States in December, 1992. He served as Ambassador to the State of Kuwait from August, 1987 until December, 1990, four months after the Iraqi invasion of that country.

Sheikh Mubarak al-Kabir, Ruler of Kuwait
and other Kuwaitis and members of the American community; and descriptions of the consulate in the old city and eventually at Bneid al-Gar where I lived for a while. Equally fascinating were their accounts of dealings on practical matters with the State Department in Washington. For example, in planning the construction of the new compound in the late 1950s, the Consulate officials pointed out that Kuwait would soon be independent and the Consulate would then become an Embassy. Brushing those considerations aside, the State Department went ahead and built a consulate, which was quickly inadequate.

In addition to early efforts to preserve the story of Americans living in old Kuwait, a comprehensive program to record the recollections of American diplomats world-wide has collected literally hundreds of taped interviews, a portion of which relate to Kuwait. One interesting insight that emerged from the record was the relationship between some early diplomatic representatives and the American missionary movement. When, at the end of World War II, the United States began to expand its presence in the Middle East, it was perhaps natural that young Americans with connections to advantage and affinities for the region, sons of missionaries, educators, and scholars, would respond to the need. To cite one relevant example, the second Consul to Kuwait was married to the daughter of John Van Ess, who was affiliated with the Arabian Mission and wrote the book, ‘Meet the Arab’; in 1943. Earlier, Van Ess played a part in selecting the site for the American Mission here in Kuwait.

By the 1950s, the resident American community, although still modest in size, was considerably larger and more diverse that it had been over the previous four decades. The well established staff of the American Mission hospital was augmented by employees and contractors of the oil companies and the diplomatic establishment, as well as by Americans, and families working for U.S. companies, like Pomeroy, Bechtel or Westinghouse, engaged in large projects such as port development, distillation plants or the huge oil pier at Mina Ahmadi. The next phase in the evolution of the community had its origins in the educational cooperation which gathered speed in the decade preceding Kuwait’s independence.

In reality, education was an aspect of the American Mission program. Edwin Calverley, the husband of Kuwait’s first woman physician, started a small school on the Mission compound at about the time the Mubarakia School began. Dr. Calverley taught English, typing and a modern curriculum to a number of Kuwaiti youths, some of whom would eventually occupy key positions in Kuwait’s government. Unfortunately, the Mission school closed during the Great Depression of the 1930s for lack of funds. As Kuwait embarked on a massive educational effort two decades later, the first steps toward higher study in the United States were taken.

In the mid-1950s, a small number of Kuwaitis were placed in American colleges with the assistance of U.S. oil companies because Kuwait had no representation there at the time. I have spoken with several Kuwaitis who were sent to live with American families and enrolled in local high schools for a year before moving to the university. Interestingly, some of them maintained contact with their host families at least as late as the early 1990’s.

I could speak at much greater length about educational cooperation which has been very important to Kuwait’s development, but, equally important, has made a vital contribution to forging Kuwaiti-American relationships at the people to people level. Let me wrap up, however, by pointing out that the first trickle of Kuwaiti students to American institutions of higher education soon turned to a flood. By the time I became Ambassador in the late 1980s, we estimated that there were between 10 and 15,000 Kuwaiti graduates of U.S. colleges and universities. This phenomenon also had important implications for the character of the American community here. During their years of study in America, some Kuwaitis met and married Americans and others had children born in the United States who thereby became dual Kuwaiti-American nationals.

Finally, following Kuwait’s independence, there was a broadening of government to government relations. The complement of the American Embassy grew in ways that highlight these relationships. As Kuwait began to acquire U.S. weapons systems, for example, the need for personnel to provide logistics and training support resulted in the creation of a U.S. Liaison Office (USLOK). Incidentally, some Kuwaiti personnel undergoing long-term training on complex weaponry in America also found American spouses and fathered dual national children. In another area, the construction of Kuwait’s excellent system of roadways led to an influx of experts from the U.S. Federal Highway Administration.

I don’t want to leave you with the impression that all of these developments in the bilateral relationship occurred without hiccups, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s. Kuwait was understandably protective of its independence and sought to pursue a policy of non-alignment between the West and the Soviet bloc, which annoyed some U.S. policy makers. From Washington’s viewpoint, neutrality didn’t appear to make much sense in light of Kuwait’s character and interests. A major difference, for instance, opened between Washington and Kuwait over the American naval facilities at Bahrain. Kuwait opposed the U.S. naval presence there at a time when their future was at issue. Fortunately for both our countries, the Kuwaiti view did not prevail and USMIDFOR retained its Bahraini facilities. I say for “both our countries” with full deliberation because, as Admiral William Crowe has pointed out in his memoirs, The Line of Fire, without them the United States would not have been in a position to provide comprehensive protection to Kuwaiti tankers in “Operation Earnest Will” or to respond as effectively or promptly as it did to the massive Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

Without dwelling on the things that have divided us at times except to make the point that, in good times and difficult times, both governments and peoples have learned a great deal about one another, the needs and ways of each other, and, I venture to say, our shared interests. And that learning process over the century has been an essential factor in transforming strangers into friends and partners.

The American Mission in its time introduced many new things besides modern medicine and the X-ray -- the piano and organ, tennis, concrete and steel construction, and the Ford Model T motor car, among others -- in Kuwait. What was more unexpected was the fact that the first employment of mechanized infantry in the Arabian Peninsula took place in January 1928. All of the automobiles in town, including those at the Mission, were mobilized to transport armed men to Al-Fajr1 where they routed an Ikhwan raiding party.
Whether at the administrative office, the collection office, or the American Cultural Centre, the DAI hosted a plethora of distinguished guests in the last few months. The list includes Tim Sebastian, moderator of The Doha Debate on the BBC, Dr. Aida Ridanovic, Imam Yahya, Dr. Lina Lee, Mr. Shim and Mr. CK Casey from DAI Director’s Circle member SK, and Princess Jeet Nabha Khemka. Also visiting were Prince Mohamed Bolkiah of Brunei (left), Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons Peter Milliken (below), member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations for the Canadian province Iris Evans (bottom right, in blue, seated with Canadian ambassador J. Reid Henry), a delegation from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (bottom left).